2

French–Jewish Relations and Historical Culture

The construction of Holocaust history did not begin from scratch in post-war Europe. Attitudes towards the recent past were formed by both contemporary politics and more persistent political and cultural trends shaped over a long time. Such deep structures, embedded in cultural frameworks, go some way to explain why the significance and meaning of the Holocaust has varied from one nation to another and why it has sparked such different responses. The present chapter will give a contextual background to the situation in France by illuminating how republican nationalism from the time of the French Revolution has formed French–Jewish relations and representations of minorities in the country’s historical culture in an enduring fashion. There are similarities between the reactions to the Dreyfus Affair and the Holocaust that only can be understood if one approaches the structural features of historical culture. By connecting historical culture to ideology, such aspects become visible, for French nationalism consists of certain, largely homogenous notions that have informed perceptions of the past over a long period of time. Previous research on the subject has also stressed the French brand of republicanism, with its emphasis on secularism, as an important factor in the delay in addressing the Holocaust.1

This perspective will be further developed here, offering a necessary context for the subsequent analysis of post-war reactions; however, equally, an important argument in this chapter is that opposition to the republican tradition spawned counter-narratives, both within and outside the Jewish community – something that should also be considered when looking at attitudes towards the Holocaust in France. Although many Jews remained loyal and supportive to the Republic and its minority policy during such political crises as the Dreyfus Affair, a small section of the community reconsidered their identity and prior to the
Second World War openly criticised anti-Semitism as well as embracing the idea of the Jews as a distinct nation. This alternative identity politics was important for the development of a historiography that centred on specifically Jewish experiences. The final part of the chapter will look at the foundation of the Centre de documentation juive contemporaine (CDJC), and the activities of its members and the political situation during the occupation. The purpose is not to give a full picture of the centre’s founding per se, but rather to contextualise its first programme in the light of this context and the prevailing republican ideology.

### French republicanism and minorities

France and Germany are often compared and contrasted in research on nationalism, nationhood, or citizenship. While nineteenth-century French nationalism has been described as territorial and assimilationist, the German understanding of nationhood was more organic, ethnocultural, and centred on the idea of one people scattered across different states. Although such a sharp division between Germany and France is questionable, it cannot be denied that the idea of the nation in France, at least since the Revolution, has been foremost constructed as the institutional and territorial framework for a people who share values and traditions rather than a sense of common ethnic belonging.

French universalism was central to republican nationalism, which implied that human nature stood above all forms of ethnic, religious, or cultural particularism. Every male citizen was recognised as an autonomous, rational individual capable of emancipating himself from social, religious, and cultural determination – a sharp break with the hierarchies and privileges of the Ancien Régime. But the revolutionary idea of citizenship was also associated with obligations. The new liberalism and notion of freedom acquired a meaning in France that was different to countries such as the US or the UK. In those countries, the state developed in a less centralised direction – social and cultural communities within the nation were more independent – and the need to restrict different religious manifestations was not as strong. In his classic work on the Jews and the Enlightenment, the American historian and rabbi Arthur Hertzberg has called the French Revolution ‘totalitarian’, referring to its proponents’ attempt to limit expressions of different forms of identity that distracted citizens from their devotion to the nation. Such a statement might seem exaggerated for a nation that provided new opportunities for previously excluded groups. Yet as a conservative, Hertzberg criticises the cultural policy that developed in France for seeking to protect individualism,